

The Western as a Film Genre: A Study

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Tong Xiaofeng is a poet, writer, filmmaker, and screenwriter. Born in Xi'an in 1963, he graduated from Xi'an Jiaotong University. He began publishing literary works in 1985 and has long been engaged in poetry, literature, and film production. During his university years, he served as editor-in-chief of *The Young City*, the journal of the Spark Literary Society at Xi'an Jiaotong University.

Since 1993, Tong has worked in film directing, screenwriting, and production planning, participating in numerous film and television projects. From 2005 to 2015, he served as a visiting professor in the Department of Film and Video Art at the School of Urban Design, Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he taught film-related courses for undergraduate and graduate students.

His poetry has been published in major literary journals including *Poetry Magazine*, *Feitian*, *Poetry Forest*, and *Contemporary Youth*, and has been included in anthologies such as *Appreciation of Chinese New Generation Poetry*, *Selected Poems of Genesis*, *Three Hundred New Poems: 1917–1995*, and *2000 Chinese New Poetry Yearbook*. His poem “Thinking of Winter” received the First Prize in the Contemporary Youth Poetry Competition in 1990.

Tong directed the independent feature film *Childhood Games* (2005), which received the Best Children's Film Award at the Sixth Digital Film Lily Awards organized by China's State Administration of Radio, Film

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1. The Concept and Conventions of Genre Cinema

Genre cinema flourished in Hollywood in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s and represented one manifestation of the commercialization of filmmaking as an art. A genre film is produced in accordance with the conventions and requirements of a particular genre, or mode. Such films display pronounced similarities in thematic concerns, plot patterns, character types, settings, and cinematic techniques; they emphasize commonality and repeatability in film production. Their basic elements or features are (1) formulaic plots; (2) stock characters; and [3] iconographic visual imagery.¹ The eight major genres that flourished in Hollywood were the Western, the musical, comedy, the family melodrama, film noir, horror, science fiction, and the war film. Among them, the Western is the genre that most fully represents a distinctively American national culture. Its dramatized narrative structures, typified characters, and natural, fluid continuity editing have won it broad acclaim among film audiences.

2. The Historical Development of the Western as a Genre

Stage One: From the Early Twentieth Century to the End of the Second World War—Formation and Maturation (the Classical Western Period)

Beginning with Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the Western became a distinctive and popular genre in American cinema. By the 1930s and 1940s, when Hollywood entered its Golden Age, the Western had become emblematic of American cinema and one of its most popular genres. John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) is a representative work of the classical Western period.

Stage Two: From the End of the Second World War to the Early 1950s—Rigidity and Stagnation (the Psychological Western Period)

The appearance in 1946 of new Westerns such as *Duel in the Sun* injected fresh blood into postwar Western cinema. *Red River*, released in 1948, stands as an enduring monument in the history of the American Western. It was the most brilliant final cadence that Howard Hawks, a master of American genre filmmaking, contributed to the Western cinema of the 1940s. The greatness of *Red River* lies in its combination of majestic Western landscapes with finely drawn psychological characterization. Against the grand era of American westward expansion, it depicts the younger generation's rebellion against and replacement of the older, conferring a revolutionary new distinction on the Western tradition. The late 1940s and early 1950s were also Hollywood's notorious "McCarthy era," when many accomplished filmmakers were driven from the industry and persecuted. In 1952 came Fred Zinnemann's great Western *High Noon*. Through its profound thematic articulation and consummate characterization, the film became a celebrated cinematic critique of McCarthyism and a landmark of the psychological Western.²

1 The Chinese source omits the numeral before its third item. "[3]" has been supplied editorially; the wording itself is unchanged.

2 Many modern accounts connect Carl Foreman's screenplay to his experience before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and to his subsequent blacklisting, although Fred Zinnemann denied that the film was conceived in explicitly political terms. The source's anti-McCarthyist reading is therefore retained as an interpretive claim rather than treated as uncontested fact. American Film Institute, "High Noon."

Stage Three: From the Early 1960s to the Mid-1970s—Transformation and Development (the “Professional Western” Period)³

Although *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), adapted from Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai*, achieved a measure of success, it also signaled that the American Western had reached an impasse.

Sam Peckinpah’s *Ride the High Country* (1962) not only anticipated the New Hollywood but also comprehensively overturned the traditions of the Western.

In 1964, the Italian filmmaker Sergio Leone began experimenting with the Italian Western. In his Westerns, characters were no longer divided cleanly between good and evil; instead, they took on the temperament of film noir: antiheroic, non-mainstream, anti-utopian, and subversive of tradition. His *Dollars Trilogy*—*A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966)—achieved unprecedented success, bringing the “spaghetti Western” and Clint Eastwood to Western enthusiasts around the world. During this period, Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) and *Duck, You Sucker!* (1972),⁴ Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and George Roy Hill’s *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) together marked the summit of the Western genre.

Western cinema then gradually waned. Although *Red Sun* (1972),⁵ directed by the British filmmaker Terence Young, assembled major stars from Europe, North America, and Asia—Alain Delon, Charles Bronson, and Toshiro Mifune—it could not arrest the Western’s tragic decline.

Stage Four: The Revival of the Western from the 1990s Onward (the Neo-Western Period)

Not until 1990 did the Western, dormant for more than a decade, experience a striking breakthrough. Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* miraculously revitalized a genre that had all but vanished from the historical stage. This epic Western, which won six Academy Awards,⁶ redrew the history of the American West on a grand scale, restored Native Americans to their rightful place as central subjects of that history, and stirred reflection and remorse over the history of westward expansion. At the same time, it renewed confidence in the Western’s resurgence in a new era.

3. Manifestations and Resonances of the Western Genre in Chinese Cinema

The Chinese film *The Swordsman in Double-Flag Town*, which appeared in 1990, has been described as the Chinese work most deeply imbued with the spirit of the American Western. In its dramatic construction and visual expression, as well as in its characterization and spatial setting, the film effectively draws on the genre model of the American Western. At the 1991

3 The source uses “professional Western” (职业西部片) as a period label for Westerns centered on hired or occupational specialists whose contractual work and group codes displace the classical hero’s civic mission. The term is retained. See Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*.

4 The film is generally catalogued as a 1971 production and initial release. English-language titles include *Duck, You Sucker!*, *A Fistful of Dynamite*, and *Once Upon a Time...the Revolution*; the source’s 1972 date may reflect its British classification and release history. Festival de Cannes, “Giu la testa”; British Board of Film Classification, “A Fistful of Dynamite.”

5 StudioCanal catalogues *Red Sun* as a 1971 film; the source gives 1972, a year used for release in some territories. The source date is retained in the body and qualified here. StudioCanal, “Red Sun (1971).”

6 The source states that *Dances with Wolves* won six Academy Awards. The Academy’s official record lists twelve nominations and seven wins. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, “The 63rd Academy Awards | 1991.”

Yubari International Fantastic Film Festival in Japan, the festival's president, the celebrated American director Robert Wise, not only awarded the film the Grand Prize but also praised it as fully capable of competing for an Academy Award.⁷

In fact, *The Swordsman in Double-Flag Town* is a thoroughly localized wuxia Western about male coming-of-age.⁸ It depicts the process by which a naive and immature boy grows into an independent, self-reliant man within a perilous environment of survival. The film's narrative is enclosed within a savage, lawless western town—a harsh world governed by the survival of the fittest, without law or justice. When real danger arrives, the townspeople collectively expose the populace's deep-seated moral failings: cowardice and selfishness. The film's central conflict thus shifts from a confrontation between the hero and evil forces to an opposition between the hero and the villagers collectively. In the end, the protagonist, Hai Ge, can only face his formidable opponent alone. Through extraordinary martial skill, he fights to victory and saves both his beloved and the imperiled town.

The film's final climactic sequence, in particular, displays the audiovisual patterning of the classical American Western: depth staging, an incrementally intensified buildup of action, and then an abrupt suspension at the moment of greatest dramatic suspense, bringing both narrative and character to their peak.

The film not only renders its characters' psychology with delicacy and precision, thereby displaying individuality and human nature to the fullest, but also employs an Eastern mode of *xieyi*—expressive suggestion—to make its visual imagery exceptionally beautiful and to realize a distinctly Chinese aesthetic realm.⁹ In its choreography of martial-arts action, the film rejects the exaggerated wire-assisted combat then prevalent in Hong Kong and Taiwanese martial-arts cinema. Through a more concise, surreal, and conceptual stylization, it radically transforms traditional action design. The film has therefore been regarded as an unprecedented success for Chinese wuxia cinema in its adaptation of the American Western model. That success derives chiefly from its highly self-conscious and accomplished handling of genre, together with its localization of narrative development and visual expression, which produces a consummate fusion of genre elements and Eastern aesthetics.

7 English catalogues vary between *The Swordsman in Double-Flag Town* and *Swordsmen in Double Flag Town*. The source places the Yubari Grand Prize in 1991, whereas a Hong Kong government film program lists it in 1992. The accessible records consulted do not corroborate Robert Wise's reported festival role or Academy Award assessment; both statements are retained pending documentary confirmation. Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, "Chinese Film Panorama 2016."

8 *Wuxia* (武侠) is a Chinese narrative tradition centered on martial heroes and codes of chivalric action. The transliterated term is retained because "martial-arts film" alone does not convey its broader ethical and cultural associations. See Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*.

9 *Xieyi* (写意; literally, "writing the idea" or "writing the intention") is a Chinese aesthetic term associated with expressive suggestion and the communication of spirit rather than exhaustive mimetic detail. The conventional gloss "freehand" is useful but incomplete, so the transliteration is retained.